

The Decentered Center:

Vanishing Point, Language, and the *Schützenscheibe*

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There is no space without a cut. I am unfortunately not a Vician but through my read of Don. Kunze's book¹ I am introduced to the recognition that language and space might share the same structure: both arise from incision. The cut does not separate two pre-existing entities — it produces them. Space is a byproduct of distance and as such could only exist after a linguistic distinction between *here* and *there*: Space nothing other than language's act of cutting itself, and the subject is that incision inscribed in flesh: the distance between "*me*" (left on my own *here*) and "*I*" (what I am for the Other already *gazing* at me from *there* without any *eye*: vanished). In Lacan's anecdote of the sardine can, this cut flashes forth:

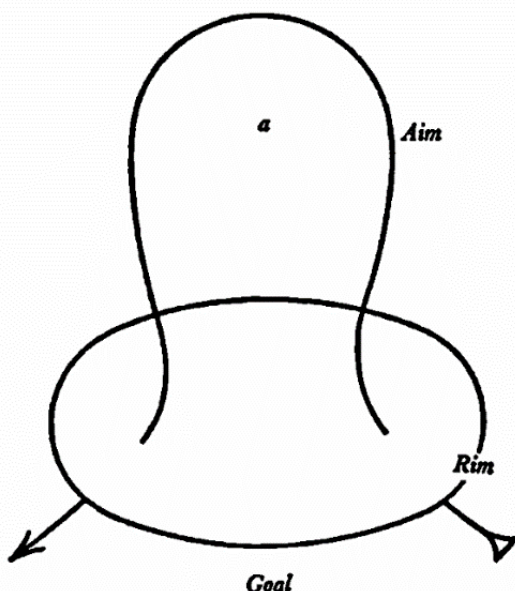
In order to give you some idea of the question posed by this relation between the subject and light, in order to show you that its place is something other than the place of the geometral point defined by geometric optics, I will now tell you a little story. It's a true story. I was in my early twenties or thereabouts— and at that time, of course, being a young intellectual, I wanted desperately to get away, see something different, throw myself into something practical, something physical, in the country say, or at the sea. One day, I was on a small boat, with a few people from a family of fishermen in a small port. At that time, Brittany was not industrialized as it is now. There were no trawlers. The fisherman went out in his frail craft at his own risk. It was this risk, this danger, that I loved to share. But it wasn't all danger and excitement—there were also fine days. One day, then, as we were waiting for the moment to pull in the nets, an individual known as Petit-Jean, that's what we called him—like all his family, he died very young from tuberculosis, which at that time was a constant threat to the whole of that social class—this Petit-Jean pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can. It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me—You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see. He found this incident highly amusing—I less so. I thought about it. Why did I find it less amusing than he? It's

¹ Kunze, D. (1991). *Thought and Place. The Architecture of Eternal Place in the Philosophy of Giambattista Vico.*

an interesting question. To begin with, if what Petit-Jean said to me, namely, that the can did not see me, had any meaning, it was because in a sense, it was looking at me, all the same. It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated—and I am not speaking metaphorically. The point of this little story, as it had occurred to my partner, the fact that he found it so funny and I less so, derives from the fact that, if I am told a story like that one, it is because I, at that moment—as I appeared to those fellows who were earning their livings with great difficulty, in the struggle with what for them was a pitiless nature—looked like nothing on earth. In short, I was rather out of place in the picture. And it was because I felt this that I was not terribly amused at hearing myself addressed in this humorous, ironical way. I am taking the structure at the level of the subject here, and it reflects something that is already to be found in the natural relation that the eye inscribes with regard to light. I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometrical point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture.²

The glittering can “looks” at him in the sun, yet “does not see him.” He feels entrapped, displaced in the gaze of the working-class fishermen who mock him. The vanishing point here is not geometrical but social: Lacan, bourgeois intellectual, is out of place in the picture. The gaze that seizes him comes from nowhere; its center is *missing (betroffen)*: *I is decentered from the eye that has left the scene: vanished (gefluchtet)*. This is the structure of the *Schützenscheibe*: the painted bull’s-eye that usually cannot coincide with the true target. The arrow always *misses*, because the center is already decentered. The *aim (Ziel)* is not the *goal (Treffer)*, and this discrepancy is the general law of the visual drive. In the context of a bad joke, teasing, or mobbing, “betroffen” (of the same root of *Treffer*) means being emotionally struck, hurt, or unsettled by someone’s words or actions. It conveys the sense of being targeted or wounded, often unexpectedly, leaving the person embarrassed, shaken, or socially exposed.

It’s the psychological hit, not necessarily physical—like the social equivalent of being “hit” by an arrow of mockery.



Lacan’s schema of the drive circuit. Ibid. p. 178

The Lacanian drive traces a path between *aim (Ziel)* and *goal (Treffer)*, yet the arrow never perfectly strikes the bull’s-eye. ‘*Betroffen*’ marks the moment

pts of Psycho-analysis (edited by Jacques-Alain -96.

of impact—the subject is struck by the symbolic point, the gaze, or the event—while '*nicht betroffen*' signals the miss, the absence of correspondence between intention and effect. The drive's trajectory exists precisely in the space between these two states, revealing desire as a movement defined by decentered targets and the perpetual displacement of satisfaction. Lacanian drive is not about completion but about the trace of pursuit, inscribed along the vector of a vanishing point: *objet petit a*.



A traditional Schützenscheibe: The hunter confronts the Schützenscheibe, unaware that the target carries the vanished gaze of its painter. The apparent center tempts him, but aiming there risks striking himself or a comrade. The decentered point inscribed in the *Scheibe* produces *betroffen*: the hunter is struck by an absent yet operative gaze, caught between aim and hit, between presence and the symbolic trace left behind and even predicted in the tears of the depicted hunter: you are doomed to hit yourself: now cry!

The *Schützenscheibe* is not merely a target; it reflects the *gaze* of its painter. The hunter who aims at its apparent center risks striking himself—the son of Wilhelm Tell—because the operative point is decentered, inscribed by the painter's vanished eye: *gaze*. The target carries a trace of the master's vision, left behind even after he has departed. In aiming, the hunter becomes *betroffen*: struck and displaced, caught in the field of a *gaze* that has no eye and this is exactly what that it makes it end-lessly effective. Like Parrhasios' curtain, the *Scheibe* does not contend with physical reality; it contends with the absent yet operative *ES-space*: the interval that ES (=S; the signifier reclining in its absence) measures between two vanishing points—the eye of the hunter and the gaze of the painter. It is this spacing that determines mastery: whether the mark lands on the son or on the apple is decided not by the hunter's skill alone but by the locus inscribed by the absent signifier. The hunter's experience of being struck—without any visible agent—reveals that desire, mastery, and the logic of the gaze are encoded in the target itself, a trace of a vision that persists beyond presence, endlessly operative in its effect.



Johann J. von Sandrart (1655–1698) after
Joachim von Sandrart
Zeuxis and Parrhasius, 1675
Etching, detail (lower plate): 13.5 × 19.1 cm

Zeuxis painted grapes so realistically in a contest with Parrhasius that birds came to peck at them. Parrhasius then presented a painting showing a linen curtain. When Zeuxis impatiently asked him to move it aside to see the supposed image behind it, Parrhasius had won, having tricked Zeuxis—the curtain itself was painted. (Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* XXXV, 64)

Joachim von Sandrart's painting (above) depicts the moment Zeuxis tries to lift the curtain on his rival's work. He poses triumphantly in front of the painting on the floor. In the background, spectators watch the successful deception, in which the famous Zeuxis of Heraclea is fooled. To the right is Zeuxis' painting, which failed to convince because it only fooled birds, not humans. Parrhasius watches calmly from a *distance*, enjoying his victory.

The rivalry of the two painters, explained by Lacan, confirms the same displacement and distance that lives inside the German aiming target:

Yet I did not hesitate to end my last talk by observing, in the opposition of the works of *Zeuxis* and *Parrhasios*, the ambiguity of two levels, that of the natural function of the lure and that of *trompe-l'œil*³. If the birds rushed to the surface on which *Zeuxis* had deposited his dabs of colour, taking the picture for edible grapes, let us observe that the success of such an undertaking does not imply in the least that the grapes were admirably reproduced, like those we can see in the basket held by *Cara vaggio's Bacchus* in the *Uffizi*. If the grapes had been painted in this way, it is not very likely that the birds would have been deceived, for why should the birds see grapes portrayed with such extraordinary verisimilitude? There would have to be something more reduced, something closer to the sign, in some thing representing grapes for the birds. But the opposite example of *Parrhasios* makes it clear that if one wishes to deceive a man, what one presents to him is the painting of a veil, that is to say, something that incites him to ask what is behind it. It is here that this little story becomes useful in showing us why Plato protests against the illusion of painting. The point is not that painting gives an illusory equivalence to the object, even if Plato seems to be saying this. The point is that the *trompe-l'œil* of painting pretends to be something other than what it is. What is it that attracts and satisfies us in it? When is it that it captures our attention and delights us? At the moment when, by a mere shift of our gaze, we are able to realize that the representation does not move with the gaze and that it is merely a veil. For it appears at that moment as something other than it seemed, or rather it now seems to be that something

³ visual illusion in art, especially as used to trick the eye into perceiving a painted detail as a three-dimensional object:

else. The picture does not compete with appearance, it competes with what Plato designates for us beyond appearance as being the Idea. It is because the picture is the appearance that says it is that which gives the appearance that Plato attacks painting, as if it were an activity competing with his own. This other thing is the *petit a*, around which there revolves a combat of which *trompe-l'œil* is the soul. (ibid. 11-112)

The first deceives the bird with grapes — mimetic illusion. The second deceives the painter himself by painting a curtain. Here the gaze no longer rests in the represented object but is trapped in the frame itself. The subject is caught by the invisible: the curtain as vanishing point, the gaze of the Other displaced, yet operative. This is exactly how signifier works through its displacement and condensation. We are at the level of Freudian *repression*, the *Vorstellungrepräsentanz* in which two terms are obligated to live together: *Vorstellung* and *Repräsentanz*. (ibid., THE SUBJECT AND THE OTHER: APHANISIS, p.216) shifts. In every signifier a child is sitting playing Fort-Da:

The activity as a whole symbolizes repetition, but not at all that of some need that might demand the return of the mother, and which would be expressed quite simply in a cry. It is the repetition of the mother's departure as cause of a *Spaltung* [separation/distance.] in the subject—overcome by the alternating game, *fort-da*, which is a *here* or *there*, and whose aim, in its alternation, is simply that of being the *fort* of a *da*, and the *da* of a *fort*. It is aimed at what, essentially, is not there, qua represented—for it is the game itself that is the *Repräsentanz* of the *Vorstellung*. What will become of the *Vorstellung* when, once again, this *Repräsentanz* of the mother—in her outline made up of the brush-strokes and gouaches of desire—will be lacking? (ibid, *Tuche'* and Automaton, 62-62)

What organizes all space is not the seen but the unseen — the *Fluchtpunkt* that is at once vanishing and fled (*gefluchtet*). The Other does not see me, yet I am structured as if already seen. His eye escapes, but its gaze remains. This gaze is the *pure operator*⁴, the only presence in a space otherwise constituted by absence.

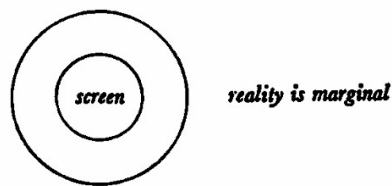
Here language and vision fold together. The child cries for milk; the mother's eye does not meet the child's. What remains is *lalangue*, the primal noise cut into demand. Mother does not care and now in that missed eye (= missing gaze) the subject appears, compelled into language. Space itself is this *miss* — the gap between the desire to be seen and the fact of being unseen. Don Kunze, reading Vico, insists that initiation is always spatial: the threshold, the

⁴ And the whole signifier is a hilbert epsilon operator in which instead of a point there is a minute Es-space in which we could be sure that the both the hunter and the hunt are housed and screened. Thanks to Quinn Foerch for introducing me to this operator (check: Orientability, Induction, Inversion, and Index: Fixing the Knot in 2-Dimensions; by Quinn Foerch | August 19, 2025, URL: [quinn foerch : thoughts](https://quinnfoerch.com/thoughts/))

border, etc. These thresholds are not physical; they are linguistic cuts.⁵ In short, the vanishing point is a linguistic scar: the point at infinity that organizes perspective, where the I (=eye) vanishes ($-\varphi$) in order for the world to appear:

Generally speaking, the relation between the gaze and what one wishes to see involves a lure. The subject is presented as other than he is, and what one shows him is not what he wishes to see. It is in this way that the eye may function as *objet a*, that is to say, at the level of the lack (φ). (ibid., 104)

At the perceptual level, this is the phenomenon of a relation that is to be taken in a more essential function, namely, that in its relation to desire, reality appears only as marginal.

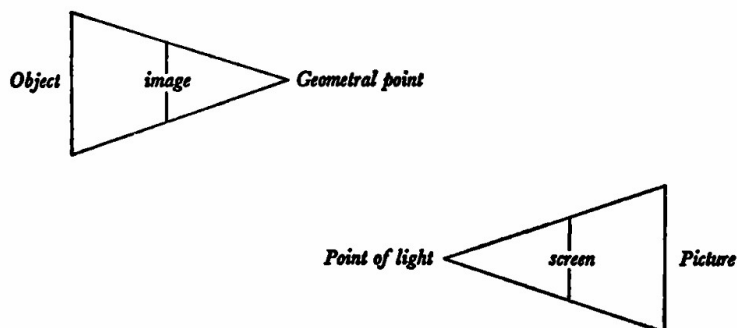


(i)

bid., 108)

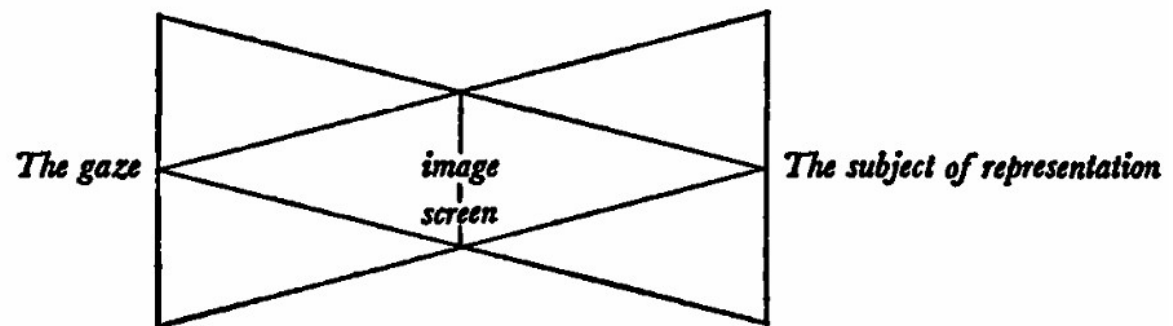
The *Schützenscheibe* is thus the model: a rim (*Scheibe*) that contains not a center but a decentered center. Wilhelm Tell, commanded by Gessler to shoot the apple from his son's head, embodies the paradox of the drive: the aim at the rim is always shadowed by another aim — the fantasy of *missing*, of killing the son. The visual drive is never directed simply at the object; it circulates around the hole, the absent bull's-eye. The vanishing point is this absent center elevated to function. In short: *Aim* (*Ziel*) = the vector that organizes the drive. *Goal* (*Treffer*) = always missed, always displaced and finally the *Vanishing point* = the absent center that makes both possible, the Real around which space organizes itself.

Then mixing these two optical conics:



⁵ However, in mantra, words lose reference and regain the power of language. They do not describe space; they *make* it. They are vanishing points spoken aloud, each syllable a *place* where meaning collapses so that consciousness may arise.

yields to this:



(ibid. p. 106); but also to this for an object like *Schützenscheibe* that has already differentiated the *Vorstellung* from its *Repräsentanz*:

